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ABSTRACT

This study explored the ways in which English educators could most effectively plan and implement their teaching to best serve the multi-literacies of the diverse student populations in today's schools. The researcher conducted interviews with classroom English teachers and teacher educators in north Alabama to gain the participants' perceptions of their effectiveness in teaching diverse literacies, opportunities for practicing effective strategies and pedagogical skills, and opportunities for improving teaching and learning and professional development. Data analysis indicated that the teachers often felt unprepared to teach the multiple literacies required in the diverse classroom populations they served. Because of time constraints and test score demands for students, the teachers felt that they were limited in teaching and modeling effective teaching strategies and multi-literacy pedagogical skills, especially connected to writing. Professional development and inservice opportunities were limited, as well. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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LITERACY AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

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LITERACY AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

As the 20th century comes to a close, teachers and teacher educators are searching for ways to better address and serve the populations of diverse learners in our classrooms. Standards for learning and recent calls for reform in education have recommended that teachers reevaluate how they teach, how students learn, what literacies should be taught, and when to teach those literacies. There have been numerous reports and research about the varied literacy skills needed by students in our rapidly changing world, but little research on how teachers can most effectively meet those demands in their classrooms.

The study was conducted to explore the ways in which English educators could most effectively plan and implement their teaching to best serve the multiliteracies of the diverse student populations in today's schools. The researcher conducted interviews with classroom English teachers and teacher educators in north Alabama to describe their perceptions of (a) their effectiveness in teaching diverse literacies, (b) opportunities for practicing effective strategies and pedagogical skills, and (c) opportunities for improving teaching and learning and professional development.

After analysis of the data, the findings of this study indicated the following:

1. The teachers often felt unprepared to teach the multiple literacies required in the diverse classroom populations they served.
2. Because of time constraints and test score demands for students, the teachers felt that they were limited in teaching and modeling effective teaching strategies and multiliteracy pedagogical skills especially connected to writing.
3. Professional development and inservice opportunities were limited.

Introduction

The definition of literacy, literacy practices, teaching of literacy skills, and meeting the demands of the 21st century have changed at an alarming rate. The definitions chosen must be applicable to a range of contexts; urban/rural areas, multicultural/diverse populations, work/school, multicultural/diverse student populations, and a growing technology for a global world in which we live. To prepare students to successfully take their places in a literate society, teachers must dialogue, research, and take risks in their classrooms to meet the demand, vision, and innovation required of them and their students (Kelder, 1996).

Review of the Literature

Historically the term "literacy" was embedded in and associated-with social and economic progress, political democracy, social and educational mobility and the development of cognitive skills; however, represented many different things to different people. Viewed as an abstract set of decontextualized skills, literacy contributed to the creation of the "deficit" model in educational and social systems (Gadsden, 1992). That model was applied in many remedial reading and writing programs at all educational levels. Ironically, teaching literacy skills in schools has been often restricted because of the educators' lack of knowledge and awareness of the interweaving of social, cultural, and oral literacy contexts of language use and identity.

Most educators' assumptions about how students use and acquire literacy came from the research in the early to middle 20th century. From that period came many genres that have since become central to teaching and literacy: non-print media, newspapers, magazines, commercial texts, instructional manuals and texts, popular paperback

literature, and computer technology (Purves, 1993). There have been radical developmental changes in texts and research on how students become literate as well as our attitudes about the value and power of literacy and how it is best learned and taught. Regardless of those changes and improvements, many educators were not prepared for the challenges of the new information technologies and "multiliteracies" that will be demanded by our students (New London Group, 1997).

The 21st century will dictate many cultural, economic, social, and literacy changes. One of the most useful strategies for educators will not be the mastery of any particular method, but rather a vision of the texts, discourses, skills, and literacies that will be required of students in order to take their place in an ever-changing society (Purves, 1993). New technologies will not replace or erase older systems of communication, but they will have a significant transformative effect. Print literacy will continue to be important, but students will be charged with building communities in relation to changing textual and media demands.

They must find a way forward in an uncertain job market and changing global society. Literacy will affect every aspect of life: school, shopping, work, socially, and the workplace that continues to be technologically demanding of all citizens. Multiliteracies was not something brand new; it was something that was firmly grounded in what many exemplary teachers have always done in their classrooms (New London Group, 1997). The goal was to supplement and extend literacy teaching for new times. There were two changes highlighted by the term: a growing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity, and the influence of the new communication technologies.

Cultural and linguistic diversity has created something paradoxical in English. Teachers have had to negotiate differences every day with a local community as well as an increasingly global world. English has been a world language applicable to global commerce, media and politics; however, it also has broken into differentation marked by accent, national origin, subcultures, and professional and technical communities (Applebee, 1996). The days of learning one single standard version of English and/or one literacy were gone.

The second shift in the concept of multiliteracies was the influence of newer communications technologies. Meaning and knowledge was made in ways that were increasingly multimodal; written-linguistic meaning was a part of visual, audio, and spatial patterns (Johnston, 1993). For example, meaning was multimodal on the World Wide Web, video, interactive media, desktop publishing, or written texts. The concept of multiliteracies had the power to transform the subject of English. The old pedagogy of one formal, standard, written national language was no longer sufficient to serve or empower students. Instead, there must be an open-ended, flexible, and functional grammar that assisted language learners to describe language differences (cultural, regional, national, technical, context specific) and the multimodal channels of communication.

As the issues become more accepted, Colleges of Education, State Departments of Education, and local school systems will train and retrain to educate teachers. With schools admitting higher numbers of diverse student populations, it was viewed as a higher need and priority (New London Group, 1997). The starting point for multiliteracies was an understanding of how texts were historically and socially located

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and produced, how they were designed artifacts, and how to overcome the connotations surrounding the word "grammar" and its frequently rule-governed translation into a literacy pedagogy that created passive learners.

What should be taught? How should it be taught? To whom and when should it be taught? Those questions are the starting point for the plan proposed by the New London Group (1997). The concept included three areas for consideration: the design, the designing, and the redesigned. The designed was the available meaning-making resources, patterns and conventions of meaning. The designing was the process of shaping the emergent meaning that involved the transformation of the available resources of meaning. Reading, seeing and listening were examples instances of designing. The redesigned was the outcome of the designing whereby students remade something brand new through synthesis. There were six major areas in which functional grammars, or meta-languages were required to describe and explain patterns of meaning and design that should be taught: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, technological, and multimodal.

Teachers must take literacy beyond its traditional reading/writing and content knowledge boundaries and help students see the connections between the knowledge and processes that are required to be school literate and those they will need for real life success (Brown, 1990; Perkins, 1990; Myers, 1996). Developing multiple literacies thus involved the integration of community literacy and personal literacy which supported the following: appreciation, understanding, and use of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school settings, maintain a good sense of self, gain a

conceptual understanding of school subjects, and/or personal communication norms arising from historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds (Johnston, 1993).

For the past two decades, educators have recognized that incorporating writing in all content area teaching enhances learning and literacy. Readers constructed meaning from what they read, and writing provided the opportunity to clarify and communicate meaning from the reading. English teachers found that activities such as summarizing, paraphrasing, note taking, and outlining significantly improved comprehension and retention of information of all texts. Further, students borrowed conventions and structure from their reading when they attempted writing activities (New London Group, 1997). The stages of the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) were clearly set forth in writing groups and peer review when used in conjunction with the reading and writing connection.

Methodology

This study used the qualitative paradigm to describe the experiences during the spring semester of four high school English teachers, and how their perceptions and teaching of multiliteracies fostered growth and achievement for their students. As reported by Lincoln and Guba (1985), there were three key points that guided this approach to understand the human experiences and to construct reality and truth from those experiences: (a) researcher and participants construct their own meaning, (b) the epistemological foundation is based on values and value judgements, and (c) because of grounded theory and triangulation, the research is empirical. Data was collected from January through May from various sources: (a) formal and informal interviews, (b)

document analysis, and (c) participant observations. The data was triangulated as a check for reliability and validity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to describe the ways in which these four teachers perceived and addressed the issues of (a) teaching multiliteracies in their English classrooms using reading, writing, and other curricular resources, (b) growth and achievement for their students as a result of their strategies and methods, and (c) needs for additional training and professional development.

Findings Related to the Research Questions

1. How do teachers utilize their instructional time to meet the literacy needs of their students in the English classroom? Even well trained and experienced teachers varied widely in how they organized the classroom and presented instructional materials. Specifically, they differed in respects of (a) their expectations, achievement objectives, and writing assignments for students, (b) how they communicated with the students about the lessons, and (c) the curriculum and assessment of the students' work. The majority of assignments were from the literature text and involved reading and responding to the reading assignment by answering the questions at the end of a selection. This supported the research that noted most English teachers focused their teaching and assessments on literature instruction because it is frequently the central organizing structure of the high school English curriculum (Applebee, 1996).

On designated days, there were large group discussions of the reading assignments that were used as a review. The grades from the multiple-choice quiz and classroom participation served as the assessment for the period with minimal grading points

derived from vocabulary words assigned from the literature text. There were few writing assignments other than the definitions of the words or the response to the questions in one classroom. One of the four teachers required a response journal that was evaluated at the end of the six-week grading period; however, the 11th graded classes were given more opportunity for writing in class. They were often given anticipation guides, KWL chart variations, and time for independent writing. One reason for the additional time for writing was their preparation for the research paper project that semester. There were no assignments in grammar during the semester and only occasional references to application of the literature/reading to the arts, technology or other literacies. This supported the research that pointed out that we "need to know what teachers are trying to accomplish in order to interpret their behaviors" (Brophy & Good, 1986, p 368). There appeared to be a need for a clearer communication of the teachers' goals and intentions toward the learning objectives for all students.

Teachers, however, did report teaching writing strategies like visual mapping, written notes, and dividing a writing task into parts. They used reading strategies such as questioning, skimming, guessing, and chunking. Several teachers reported teaching students various methods for displaying problems visually such as Venn diagrams, webbing, and advance organizers. Journals were used as a means of "internal talk." This tool grew from a networking and collaborating with others. As described by Myers (1996), this is a powerful internalized discourse for self-regulation, problem analysis and self-discovery. This strategy was helpful when dealing with diversity of students. Pluralism and diversity were served when students discovered how to weave the differences of thinking in cooperative groups into a respect for those differences. Myers

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(personal communication, Chicago IL, June, 1999) commented that "when schooling is effective, it constructs a public discourse in our classrooms, and teaches students how to participate, and how they might define themselves in the process."

Teachers' perspectives on their students determined what kinds of teaching and learning they believed were effective or appropriate for them. Factors such as ability, grade level, race, and home cultures of students shaped their perspectives in different ways. These teachers seemed to be clearer about the educational goals for their "honors" students than for their students in the "regular" classes. In the honors classes, the students were expected to identify, understand, and use the different modes of writing such as descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive. Those students read more in class, wrote more in class, and appeared to have a much wider vocabulary than did the students in the lower level classes. This supported the research that noted students who read well had significantly increased vocabulary and writing abilities, and that a print rich environment needed to be in place to facilitate that ability.

2. What goals and expectations did the teachers have concerning academic achievement and/or literacy learning for their students? These teachers were concerned with the skills basic to passing the Alabama Exit Exam and ACT for college as well as the grades for the academic grading periods. Their attitudes and beliefs contributed to the ways in which they designed and taught the classes as well as their expectations for the students' grades. Many of the students were college-bound and were interested in learning the literacies that would assure them of success on the admission exams. While the teachers indicated that they were aware of the "other things the students needed to

know," they felt that their teaching had to address the mandated skills for English and language arts that would be tested at a later date.

They were aware that the best practice in teaching would have been to integrate transformed practice with the literary skills the students were studying, but they had experienced poor results with their earlier attempts to engage the students. These teachers also articulated that they were well aware of the reform in education that called for better writing skills of students at all levels. They pointed out that there was "no time to cover the material and teach writing too." There was the sense that many students did not have the conventional grammatical structures, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation skills to create and/or communicate well with writing assignments. Two of the teachers had utilized the computer lab for books-on-line for readers who were diagnosed as "slow" readers, but cited few opportunities to go to the computer lab or to use writing activities that would enhance their reading/writing skills. They felt that many of their students were not motivated, and few had computers at home with which to work. This supported the research (Myers, 1996) that reported in today's world with information changing at an alarming rate, many students would be unprepared to meet the demands of the workplace because they did not have the opportunities for bridging the skills and literacies learned in school to the real world.

Many of the students were from migrant Hispanic families and had the additional problem of English as a second language that hindered their literacy learning. This supported research that found that the teachers' assumptions about students' abilities, even though well-intended, may actually undermine the learning and achievement for students who come to school from home cultures that do not support learning and

traditional school literacy practices (Gee, 1996; Paley, 1996). Most students did not discover the powerful relationships between spelling and vocabulary on their own. They needed extra help with the language barrier as well as the adjustment to a culture that values the literacies of reading and writing. These teachers assessed their effectiveness and made instructional decisions influenced by their histories and pedagogical beliefs as they applied to the range of situations and the individuals they encountered in the classroom.

They faced the problems of not being able to communicate clearly with some of the Spanish-speaking students, and there was little support in the way of interpreters in the classroom. This added to the low expectations for literacy and/or achievement for some of the students by all of the teachers, increased teacher frustration, and this finding supported the research by the New London Group (1997). Further, the reading of books was restricted. During oral reading in class, often the special education students, "delinquent" children, minorities, and ESL students were passed over and not called on to read because of the additional time required for their slower reading skills. Teachers reported that time was a restriction in effectively serving the needs of the ESL and LEP students' needs.

3. What did the teachers feel would enhance their teaching and students' learning by way of additional training or professional development? While there was a program in place to assist with the problems that affected teaching the Hispanic students, the teachers felt that it was not working well. They occasionally got articles to read that addressed second language learning at departmental meetings, but all felt uncomfortable in dealing with those students because of the language barrier and cultural differences. Professional

development was not a strong focus at the school; there were no guest speakers, or professional days for conferences taken by any of the teachers that year. There seemed to be a sense of need, but a sense of apathy and frustration in the attitudes of the teachers. They were aware of the intent to facilitate their teaching and the students' learning, but the factors of time, finances, and personnel were problematic. The sociocognitive context of the school had affected ideas and images by overlapping communities of professionals and the teachers felt that they had to look beyond the usual - - - to read, research, and discuss to set new goals and processes. The teachers reported that they were not trained in the newer methodology of delivering curriculum in innovative and effective ways, and expressed a need for "some ideas on what to do!" They worked in a vacuum, and they were isolated like many teachers in many schools. There were few opportunities to dialogue, or to share their ideas in the professional arena in ways to maintain a common vision for the achievement and academic success for their students. This supported the research that suggested that while much educational reform has called for changing the teacher, there could also be benefits in changing the professional setting (Applebee, 1996, Langer, 1995, Myers, 1996). Often the setting that includes the larger educational system from which the decisions are made and the goals are set affects how teachers behave and grow as professionals to create the culture that supports student literacy and learning.

Conclusions and Implications

1. The perceptions of the teachers toward the effectiveness of their teaching multiliteracies should be treated as problematic and suggested a need to determine how they could design a better plan of delivery of curriculum that would better meet the

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students' needs in the English classroom. There was little attention given to diversity of learning styles, abilities, backgrounds, or interests of the students. There was a "cookie cutter" type of instructional strategy that was designed to meet the needs of the testing procedures, but little time devoted to developing the higher order thinking skills or metacognition needed to scaffold the literature studies in which the students were involved.

While the reform in education demands a higher competency on test scores, the focus has to be on the overall quality of the instruction and student learning and not just the end-of-the-year scores. Researchers have documented that English content areas are more difficult with regard to assessment of how and why teachers teach the skills that they do. English has multiple content within the area unlike the science or math subject areas, and is not linear or sequential in all respects. There is a wide degree of autonomy in the choices made by English teachers; however, they must integrate the necessary skills for students to acquire literacy in all areas. For the individual student who comes to school, there is a wide variance of background, readiness, and culture that affects his/her abilities to bridge the newly learned literacies demanded in the English classroom.

To better teach literacies on all levels, more writing activities needed to be designed and planned into the curriculum. Teachers must provide a classroom environment that creates respect for reading and writing while providing a framework for constructive instructional strategies. They needed to create a reader/writer friendly environment and give time for reading and writing in class every day to every student regardless of that student's abilities or diversity. In classrooms that promote writing and reading, those classrooms exhibit several characteristics: (a) is brightly decorated and print-rich, (b)

fosters communication of a community of readers and writers, (c) students value reading and writing and encourage one another, (d) the teacher models reading and writing with the class, and (e) writing is taught as a process and the process is considered as important as the product.

Multicultural literature needs to have a larger place in the English classroom. By offering to more students a range of opportunities for appreciating and understanding different cultures and diversity, teachers enrich the students' cultural literacies and critical thinking skills. They are more able to embrace diversity and the implications for new roles of both their individualism and commonalities (Myers, 1996). Young adult literature is one way of giving attention to the pluralism and diversity and to integrate traditional values of compassion, courage, honesty, and to provide a self-fashioning of adolescents' intelligence. Readings and writings in English classrooms need to be demonstrative of those perspectives when selected by teachers. "By 2025, youths in the United States will be about half white, and half minority" (Hodgkinson, 1995, 32). Students who interact with these immigrants at school and in the community cannot be expected to ignore this experience when they read and write, and teachers must consider this literacy need in planning the curriculum in English classes.

The contexts of literacy instruction stretches beyond the classroom curriculum. We must look outside the classroom to the role of home and community in both shaping literacy expectations and literacy development. Literacy demands have changed in this country as well as how various groups and individuals gain access or do not gain access to the higher forms needed in today's world. These include not only a set of individual skills, but also a complex cultural and technological set of skills. There are critical

elements that contribute to improved academic achievement and highly literate students who are able to use their literacy in English language arts and other classes as well. We must provide dedicated communities, public officials, and educators who understand socially supportive and cognitively challenging learning contexts rich in content as the foundation for learning.

2. Because of the teachers' perceptions of a lack of training and/or skills necessary to address the diversity of the student population in the classrooms, there should be a plan to provide inservice and continuing professional development concerning multiliteracies and multicultural issues. Ideology determines how teachers define effective teaching and how their perspectives on students shape their ideas about what kind of curriculum and teaching strategies are effective for them. The long debated practice of ability tracking and labeling students as "honors," "Advanced Placement," "tech prep," and "remedial" often establishes bounded, pre-defined expectations not only for what the students can do, but for what they cannot do. There should be a needs assessment committee to provide necessary opportunities that teachers need to investigate and improve their teaching to diverse cultural and student academic needs. Teaching English is based on a universal capability of children and is not based on a universal model of intelligence or a universal model of literacy (Myers, personal communication, Chicago, IL, June, 1999). Children who live without verbal interaction cease to babble or speak, even though they have the biological foundations required for speaking, and children who are not afforded the opportunities for learning will not learn, regardless of their innate capability for learning. Often, English teachers dismiss recurrent social demands for change as meaningless "fads," or as intrusions into a subject with universal

form (Myers, 1996). Today's exemplary English teacher must move away from that attitude and practices of the 1960s-1980s to the new literacies and teaching all students for the future that is being shaped by the public and professional debate.

Different teachers and classrooms may produce different results even when the students are very similar. This can be problematic, and must be addressed. It is particularly important to understand the features that are in place where high-risk students are successfully acquiring high levels of literacy learning. Additional research is needed to inform educators about (a) the kind of English instruction that helps all students become critical thinkers and multiliterate, (b) how effective teachers strengthen and develop their skills to better address diversity in the classroom, and (c) how to increase student achievement (Applebee, 1996; Langer, 1995). Teachers in exemplary English programs are distinguished by their participation in professional networks both within and outside their own schools and districts. There is a substantial positive correlation in teaching and learning when classroom teachers collaborate with university researchers and/or conduct action research with their own students. Those discussions between teachers and researchers provide and informed and safe professional context in which practice and approaches to teaching and learning are examined to boost the literacy development of even the most challenging students.

3. The school and/or school system must review the needs for basic skills in reading and writing to diagnose and implement prescriptive curriculum for the students who fall below grade level and are struggling. This includes reading skills, writing skills as well as social and interaction skills of students served in the English classroom. Teachers must be better trained to assess students' writing. As needed, the remediation of those

students should be addressed to bring them to the level necessary to achieve academically. The areas of multiliteracies teaching should be included in the writing curriculum design to insure that the students are prepared for success in the following: (a) school, (b) community, (c) workplace, and (d) global technology including basic computer skills. The multiliteracies required of all students for the future will demand that they are literate in all the various manifestations of "technology," from group work to using computers and spell-checkers, and from thinking strategies to writing-to-learn.

For many years, English teachers have discouraged collaboration, the use of spell-checkers, and talking to others during class. Especially for writing groups and writing across the curriculum, research has proven that all students benefit from the internal talk of working in collaboration with peers. One of the new responsibilities of schooling is to teach students how to acquire and organize a network of tools and internal talk to distribute their problems in learning. Perkins, (1990) and Brown (1990) proposed a jigsaw assignment in which different members of a group have different parts of a problem. Editing groups and other forms of collaborative learning in the classroom can contribute to a model of the autonomous classroom, separate from the world but provide a connection for learning about the world.

Research studies (Langer, 1995, Myers, 1996; Perkins, 1990) have shown that in classrooms that incorporate reading, writing, and other contexts for learning as an interwoven curriculum, there is a higher level of student achievement. Teachers should provide dialogic classroom discourse using open discussion, authentic questioning, and other patterns of learning to replace the monologic (rote learning, lecture, seatwork) patterns traditionally used. In most classrooms, however, this type of dialogic discourse

is rare. Specifically, lower level students are not encouraged in engaged discussions; however, when teachers include all students in this context, the students are more motivated to learn and achievement is increased. Teachers must excel at personalizing their interactions with students, treating them as individuals whom they care about and who have something to contribute.

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